

Christmas 1, Year C (RCL)
December 27, 2020
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3
Psalm 147
Galatians 3:23 – 25; 4:4 - 7
John 1:1-18

And the Word Became Flesh

Here we are on the last Sunday of the strangest year of most of our lifetimes – and one of the most horrific. 2020 will be remembered alongside the year 1918 when over 500,000 Americans died of the Spanish flu pandemic that may have killed as many as 50 million people worldwide – one that will be remembered alongside the national tragedy of September 11th, 2001 in which 2,977 people died in a single day in coordinated terrorist attacks. Perhaps you will recall how eerie the days were that followed 9/11 – how planes didn't fly, skies were missing their familiar white jet trails, and the silence seemed deafening. That too, was a memorable and a strange year. But can even 9/11 compare to the upending of our lives, that the pandemic of 2020 has brought us? All other news aside, and there was plenty of it, we have suffered so many losses this year from COVID-19. Over 332,000 people have died in this country alone. Many small businesses have had to close, and even large companies have had to lay off employees. Churches have had to find new ways to be church; singing has been labeled a super-spreader activity; weddings and funerals have become high-risk gatherings; and the Sacrament of Holy Communion has become a threat to the well-being to those receiving it and to those distributing it alike. Travel has slowed to a trickle. The experience of attending a live theater, dance, or music performance has been impossible. And much worse, hunger has become the constant companion of many Americans even as the usage of food banks has increased dramatically. Vulnerable populations – individuals who are homeless, those who work at meat packing plants, those living on

reservations, in prisons, and in nursing homes have been hit hardest of all. Middle and upper-class people are working from home; students of all ages and incomes attend classes remotely; janitors, grocery store clerks, nurses, and delivery people have been recognized as “essential workers,” which, of course, they are. Among all of the losses we’ve suffered during this season of COVID-tide, one of the greatest and most universal has been the simple pleasure of human touch – of a warm handshake, a clap on the back, a high five, a hug. Instead, we touch only those we share a home with, we wear masks to protect one another, and we have become used to dots on floors in public places telling us to stand 6 feet from the next person in line.

If ever there were a time we needed a reminder of God with skin on, this year is it.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

John 1 is as close as we get to a birth narrative in John’s Gospel. Completely missing are all of the familiar sights, sounds, and smells that we imagine in the stable in Bethlehem when we read the story from Matthew or Luke.

There are no kind and gentle, even if somewhat smelly, animals standing silently by. No birth cries are heard. No straw covers the delivery room floor. There is no feed trough prepared to serve as a cradle for the baby. In fact, the most important element of all is missing from the scene – the baby!

Instead, we have the rich, elegant, resonant words of John that ring out through the centuries:

“In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”
Yet even without the baby, the manger, or the donkeys and lambs looking on, John 1 is very much about our God who chooses to enter human history, to put on flesh like ours, and to live among us.

John 1 is about a love so powerful that it dares to be vulnerable. A love so generous that it reaches into the places of brokenness in our lives to offer the wholeness that only God can give. It is love that brings light, and life, and joy, and hope.

John 1 takes us back to the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, ‘Let there be light’ . . .”

These words mark, not only the beginning of our Bibles, but the beginning of everything – of time . . . of creation . . . of history . . . They mark the time when God first spoke the Word that created order out of chaos – that gave form to nothingness – and created light from darkness. They mark the time when God first entered human history.

God has spoken that creative and redeeming Word many times since the first Word was spoken. And when the “fullness of time had come” as Galatians tells us, God spoke to us in a totally new way – by a Son . . .

That’s what Christmas is all about.

It's about the great God Almighty throwing off majesty, and separateness, and mystery to become what we are so that we could know God more fully and experience God's love with greater certainty. Just as "in the beginning" God spoke and created order out of chaos, now God speaks through Jesus, "The Word made flesh," to create order out of the chaos of our lives.

God with skin on.

In Jesus we meet a human being like ourselves – who knows anger, frustration, heartbreak, and temptation – who struggles with doing the right thing – who weeps when he is sad – who isn't afraid to get right down into the messiest of human predicaments, standing with the poor and the oppressed – experiencing with us the full range of human joy and pain – loving even the most blatant of sinners – loving even (perhaps especially) those we find hardest to love.

In Christ, God fills our lives with new possibilities – offering us salvation despite our sins and shortcomings, showing us how to be the people God has created us to be and to live the lives God has created us to live, teaching us how to love one another as God loves us, teaching us how to love ourselves as God loves us, giving us hope in place of despair. In Christ, God reaches out to us in our weakness, our present pain, our deep woundedness, and our confusion, and enfolds us in loving arms of compassion and grace.

John writes, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."

These gifts of light and life are given to us in the unlikely package of a newborn child – of an infant born to a teenage girl in a crowded, smelly stable in Bethlehem, given an animal's feed trough for his first bed – not quite the picture the people had in mind for the coming of their Messiah!

They expected God to come in power to overthrow the forces of evil in the world. But that is not the way God chooses to work in our world.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, "God chose what was weak in the world to shame the strong."ⁱ God's love for God's people is shown, not in the power of God to put an end to evil and pain and suffering in our world, but in the way God gave up power and became vulnerable – coming to us as a little child.

We don't like to be vulnerable ourselves, so we certainly don't expect vulnerability out of God. "Vulnerability is something we instinctively reject because we are taught from preschool on that we must protect ourselves, control our behavior and our lives. But in becoming one of us, Christ made himself totally vulnerable for us, in Jesus of Nazareth."ⁱⁱ . . . Another lesson for us in how to love.

God has shown us, in the Word made flesh, that love means revealing oneself to another in very tangible, concrete ways – in shared experience – in words spoken – in acts of kindness done – in dreams shared.

Love means being willing to give up power and control to allow others to see us as we really are - with all our weaknesses and insecurities – to love, even though we know that love often comes packaged with its share of pain, to show care for and support of people the world tends to disregard or reject, to love even those who hate us, to have the heart of a servant, ministering to others in the name of Christ, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable for the sake of others.

Madeleine L'Engle goes so far as to say that, "It is not possible to be a Christian while refusing to be vulnerable."ⁱⁱⁱ

God took quite a chance with us.

Throughout history, God has been revealed to us in many surprising ways – but none is more surprising nor more absurd than God choosing to reveal God’s self in the infant Jesus. I wonder if even our all-knowing God had to take a deep breath before taking the plunge into human flesh.

In his book “God Came Near,” Max Lucado muses,

“How absurd to think that such *nobility*

would go to such *poverty* to share such a *treasure*

with such *thankless* souls . . .

But God did.

And God does.

The only thing more absurd than God’s gift

is our stubborn unwillingness to receive it.”^{iv}

How will we receive God’s gracious gift this Christmas? How will we open our hearts to the wonder of God’s love revealed to us in the infant Jesus? Can we trust God to transform the chaos of our lives into the pattern of God’s choosing, giving evidence of the life-giving and reconciling power of God in Christ Jesus?

Will we allow God’s love to flow through us to others without being paralyzed by the fear of being hurt – to allow the Word to become flesh *in us*?

Rejoice this Christmas in God’s gift of Jesus, the mystery of the Word made flesh who comes to bring life and light to all people.

The light shines in the darkness in our lives

and in the darkest corners of the world,

and the darkness did not –

the darkness will not –

overcome it.

Thanks be to God.

Discussion question:

Richard Rohr says that “God loves things by becoming them.”^v Further, Rohr says that God has done this three times already – “First in creation; second in Jesus . . .; and third, in the ongoing beloved community which is slowly evolving throughout all of human history.”^{vi} What thoughts come to mind as you ponder Rohr’s words?

ⁱ I Corinthians 1:27

ⁱⁱ Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water*, p. 189

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Max Lucado, “God Came Near,” p. 34.

^v Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, p. 20.

^{vi} Ibid.